



## Book Review

# Lois Presser (2022) *Unsaid: Analyzing Harmful Silences*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press

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Silence and “the unsaid” are interesting phenomena. Besides and beyond words and narratives, we are made of silences—silences to be read, (re)searched, heard, and understood. If it is true that reality is one and manifold because it exists simultaneously as it is lived subjectively and constructed socially/relationally/situationally, it is also true that not all stories are told with words and not all words become stories.

In *Unsaid: Analyzing Harmful Silences*, Lois Presser succeeds in discovering and showing us the worlds of silence and “the unsaid.” “The elephant in the room”—an idiomatic expression that is used to point out an obvious truth that is nonetheless ignored—is an issue that everybody seems to know something about, but that nobody actually wants to see, mention, or address (Zerubavel 2006; see also Natali 2016). Presser’s work takes a significant step towards exploring and visualizing what could be called the “elephant in the room” of criminology—what is *not* told or is *not* represented in our ways of analyzing and narrating crime. In so doing, Presser enables a fresh perspective on silence and “the unsaid”—a creative reinterpretation that generates novel insights into (criminological) reality.

Presser organizes her book into six chapters, providing an in-depth analysis of “the unsaid” and of harmful silences through a number of different examples. She highlights how criminological inquiry delves into more than just stories and narratives, and emphasizes the significance of the unexpressed and “the unsaid” where the stories merely serve as prompts or shadows, indicating what words imply or assume. In this sense, Presser demonstrates criminology is made not (only) of *words*, but also of *all the silence* and all that is not said but that we still suspect or contemplate. An investigation of “the unsaid” also helps in redefining the complex and controversial subject that is crime, adding a fundamental contribution to the narrative criminological analysis.

The complexity of “the unsaid” that Presser illuminates in her latest work rests—in my view—on one question in particular: Which forms do our theoretical and methodological approaches take when we find ourselves faced with “the unsaid” and silences which, in turn, invite us to see and listen to certain narrative angles/perspectives (and certain subjects) and to exclude others? Silences are always permeated with dilemmas and paradoxes. On the one hand, they are bearers of judgements—the way they are built, shaped, and put into context affirms a project of world, humanity, and interpersonal relationships. In this sense, silence expresses an ethic, and its presence may also activate feelings that are tied to the perception of an injustice. On



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the other hand, silences are bearers of a constitutive ambiguity and, for this reason, they can initiate multiple and conflicting discourses and narratives. These discourses and narratives invite our imagination to generate innumerable readings of a “boundless” text (Presser 2022: 130), each plausible and each understood as an accurate report of what the silences may represent. Silences can be interpreted in various ways, according to the symbolic, cultural, and moral perspectives that open and direct our eyes. Between these aspects of silence, there is not a separation, but a continuous dialogue, in the form of (an) oscillation. Therefore, silences are not restricted to “absences,” but intervene in the moral debate expressing consensus or condemnation, approval or rejection.

Rephrasing some pivotal questions from Presser’s work, we can ask ourselves: Which is the “story” of which silence is (a) part? Every story “frames” certain sequences of events, inevitably excluding others from the “lighted scene”; to paraphrase Bauman (2004: 17), without selection there would be no story. Indeed, according to *how* we answer (a question), the analysis of silence and “the unsaid” will be different: it will show different things and lead to different conclusions. What silence cannot express in words, it communicates through its unique language, sparking endless debates where everyone aims to assert his/her/their viewpoint as “obviously true” (see Becker 2014), contributing to the narrative. Silence asks us to *take a position*—to move nearer to or further away from the represented (and *not* represented) realities. As Presser (2022: 129) clarifies: “[m]y methodology orients to two kinds of absences: unsaid truths about power and harm; and missing subjects, the latter having to do with excluded persons, events, actions, experiences, contexts, and perspectives.”

*Unsaid: Analyzing Harmful Silences* offers a route for criminologists to tread through somewhat wild and treacherous terrain. This unexplored terrain requires careful traversal, acknowledging that, as John Cage notes, there is no silence without sound. In silence, all possible rumors can hide, just as the colors of the spectrum refract from white. Presser’s work helps us analyze, distinguish, and connect all the rumors and colors of “the unsaid” and silence. From this perspective, the silence and the word are not opposites: both are active and significant. The silence is not a scrap, a story to discard, or an emptiness to be filled; it is part of communication in the same way as language and the body manifestations that accompany it. Its polysemy makes it available for various uses; understanding it requires one to obtain an idea of the concrete situation in which it is a party. Its effectiveness in acting upon the other, in passing on a meaning and in feeding behaviour, is not inferior to that of language. In the end, eloquence is not only a question of words, but also a question of unsaid and silences that *speak* volumes (Le Breton 2015).<sup>1</sup>

To ponder the role of silence requires reflecting on the various meanings it can assume in its interaction with others (e.g., people, institutions, structures). In the process, numerous figures of silence can appear, the significance of which can be disclosed only by the *context* of enunciation. Silence can reveal itself as a formidable instrument of power and domination (including human domination over nonhumans) for those who know how to use it. It can also be a form of opposition, when one deliberately keeps silent to avoid confronting someone or a particular situation. What interests Presser is the possibly *harmful* consequences of silence and of “the unsaid”—harms that often take shape in and through what is suppressed, left out, or taken for granted. As Presser (2022: 2) writes, “Unsaid *does, invites, and conceals* harm. The aims of the book are to draw attention to the effects of unsaid on harm and to advance a methodological approach for determining what is unsaid within texts, particularly when unsaid matters to well-being”. This includes nonhuman animals’ well-being.

There are very few scholars in criminology who give proper attention and dignity to what is ambiguous, incomplete, or allusive. Sometimes these dimensions are not even perceived and recognized, and scholars and researchers seem to forget that what is in the expressed words—written or spoken—is only a part of what *could be* there. It is not by chance that a name for the “narrative unsaid” is still missing in criminology. The tools already existing in the criminological tradition are not sufficient: much more is needed when faced with a lacuna in a story. There is a need for analysis, questions, reflections, speculations, and comparisons among various kinds of omissions; there is a need to plumb the intention of the text, visiting its depths. This is what Lois Presser’s latest work manages to accomplish with great intelligence and originality.

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<sup>1</sup> For some scholars, the rediscovery of silence also corresponds to the success of walking, where the walking becomes an act of civic resistance that favours slowness, availability, conversation, curiosity. In this sense, some criminologists have recently suggested the importance of adopting walking methodologies (Natali 2023; Natali and de Nardin Budò 2019).

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